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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the contemporary and future role of the school board in American education. The first part of the paper offers the reader a unique view of the school board's role through the vehicle of a fictional characterization of school board-community relations during a controversy. In the second part of the paper, the author suggests that present school boards are often unable to meet pressing educational needs. This analysis of contemporary difficulties is followed by suggestions for enhancing the planning, problem-solving, and policy making contributions of school boards in the future. The suggestions assume optimum circumstances in the following areas: (1) school board recruitment; (2) superintendent's role; (3) teacher's role; (4) teacher, student, and community participation in the educational program; (5) educational finance; (6) research resources; and (7) school district size. (JH)

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THE SCHOOL BOARD ROLE — PRESENT AND FUTURE

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OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Although detachment is frequently helpful and theory is essential, a view from the platform of what the Wall Street Journal of April 16, 1969, describes as, "a lot of guff for no pay" will be an aid to the examination of the school board role — what it is and what it should be in the future.

There is, of course, no "the school board view."

The description in The Scene which follows is of composite persons in a composite place — none of them real in the literal sense.

THE SCENE

EPILOGUE

All the kings horses and all the kings men .....

The community was in shambles. No broken windows or physical harm to its citizens, but emotions were laid bare and what had been said and done was indelible ... or indelible enough. The pressure built up so quickly, was so intense and attitudes so frightening that some people began wondering about themselves . . . about the companions they had acquired. Some wanted to speak out but didn't. A few did. Some felt as if they were awakening from a dream in which they were naked in a crowd .. exposed. But more, god dammit, were not ready to consign their children to go to school with coloreds.

...I'll bet he doesn't have a high school daughter.

...It's all right to talk about it, but there just isn't enough money to do it.

...Pardon me, but if you'll just look at the budget recommendation ...

...Shut up! If I wanted my kids to go to school with niggers I would have moved there instead of where I live.

...We still have some rights and look around you. We all come from neighborhood schools.

...But the high school your children attend is three miles aw ...

...We just don't have the money. Our schools are great just the way they are. And nobody, including those sons-of-bitches on the school board, is going to tell me to put my child on a bus to go to that school.

...But he's already traveling on a bus.

...That's a hell of a lot different and you and the others make me sick. The Communists said they'd do it, but I'll be damned if I'll sign my name to it.

...But it's only a recommendation and the Community Planning Committee made it.

...It's stacked. You know it. I know it. No one asked me how I felt.

...I don't like the plan, but the way people are acting frightens me.

Rumor, the pacesetter of fear and frustration, set in with a two pronged attack on the plan and the school board members.

About the plan.

...Next thing they'll want to ship them in from outside the district.

...They wouldn't.

...Don't bet on it.

...They are.

...That's a fact.

...Next week.

...Of course, it's true. Ask anyone.

About a school board member.

...If she'd spend some time on the recommendation instead of her daughter's wedding, she couldn't possibly vote for it.

...With her old man dead, she's probably in charge of the shotgun. Maybe she doesn't have time.

...She's probably three month's pregnant.

...That's right. Three month's pregnant.

...They said what? Mother, how can they be so cruel?

...I don't know. I don't know.

There were calls, letters, threats, insults. Most were directed to the school board -- the enemy.

...Everyone knows they're going to put it over on us whether we like it or not.

The board meeting.

...Move that the recommendation be denied.

...Second.

...Discussion?

...All in favor.

...Opposed.

...Passed.

The benediction was in order.

The community was spent. But its emotions were at the ready in case anyone doubted it was not prepared to defend its

rights. The surging, confused, jumbled, swirling nightmare was over. The problem remained.

"The way to begin is to begin." (Martin Luther King)

THE PLACE

MIDCITY (population 103,425). The setting is very ...

Culture Groups

People from many nations make their homes in Midcity. Many date their ancestry from the Puritans and in some ways preserve the characteristics of their ancestors. A recent addition to this friendly city are Negroes who add to the diversity of citizenship along with those of Mexican-American and Oriental descent.

The People

The first inhabitants were Indians. In 1872 from the north came ...

Location, Size and Description

This charming city by the Bay is noted for its industriousness and industry and is located near major population centers. It measures 12.3 square miles and most of its land is in use for residential, commercial and industrial purposes ...

Education

Free public schools were established in 1882. There are 10 elementary schools, 2 junior high schools and 2 senior high schools. The superintendent who is in charge of the schools is hired by the five school board members who are elected by the people. Education is compulsory and there are approximately 12,000 children in the public schools. Parochial schools ...

(Source: Cerreto Encyclopedia, 1960 edition.)

THE SCHOOL BOARD

Sam McCarter is a supervisor in a Midcity toy plant where he has been employed for thirty years. He graduated from Midcity High School, spent two hitches in service and came back married and ready to settle down in the community he had lived in almost all of his life. He had a kind of mediocrity that followed him wherever he went. He had never felt important except when he participated in his service club or the youth baseball league and on either side of these activities when he drank. In recent years this latter activity was not so well shielded from the community as before but what's the difference in a community where the average resident is in the community for only five years, only one out of four who are qualified vote in school board elections and only 25 - 50 attend board meetings. What do they know and what do they care. Sam was on his fourth term on the board and this would be his last . . . he thought. Well, he was pretty sure. Four terms is a long time, but what would he do if he wasn't on the board. He was near retirement at work. He had no hobbies. He got along with his wife well . . . or at least adequately . . . or at least as well as most . . . depending on whose view was taken.

Sometimes he thought about equality of education and segregation. He really did want to do the right thing, but it wasn't easy with all the heat the community and his friends leveled at him. After all, they had been there long before these new people who were causing all the trouble.

He thought of another kind of equality . . . usually after a few drinks. His vote counted the same as any other board member. It didn't matter whether they had 2, 4, 6 or 8 years of college. They could make all the money they wanted to, but the one man one vote (Supreme Court, you know.) rule applied here too . . . with two exceptions. Over the years Roy Neff had been very kind to him while serving on the board with him and had loaned him small amounts of money along the way. That didn't mean that Roy owned Sam, but it did mean that Sam owed Roy. And, a friend is a friend. And if a particular vote is important enough to a friend, then it should be that way with his friends wherever possible. The other exception was Lois Woods. It was a funny thing. They had never discussed it, but it was there. She called to discuss votes from time to time and urged him to take her view. Sam was bright enough and added numbers and people together pretty well. His view of her view was that if he didn't take her view, Lois was likely to tell her

brother who was on the police force to keep an eye on him, keep his resistance to her view in mind, and if he weaved too much, take him in. Again, a friend is a friend and you ought to have one where you may need one.

Lois Woods had many years of school board service behind her, both before and after the death of her husband. The church (fundamentalist), school board and thinning group of women friends took most of her time. Her youngest child (a daughter) was getting married and the others already were married, lived outside the state and had some strange ideas about people . . . the colored and what was going on in the country. It was disturbing to talk about it, and she and her children loved one another so they didn't talk about it. Besides, when she even mentioned her children's views to her friends, they got very upset. She wanted to defend their views except she wasn't comfortable with their views. Her friends were pretty distant from school affairs, but her married children were distant from the community and they just didn't understand the people there . . . or did they. Between her children, her church and her views of long ago (and things were so simple then) life had become more complicated. The community, the courts, the parents, the students, the chamber of commerce, etc. didn't make it any easier. If the problem would just go away, go away, go away . . . School events like graduations (accepting the

class), baccalaureate services (It's such a shame that fewer and fewer students attend them.), school luncheons and dinners, award banquets, meetings with the teachers (We've always had such a good relationship with them although some of them are beginning to push like the students.) and administrators (We've always thought so much alike.) and school board meetings (They went well and we accomplished so much . . . and the community wasn't upset.) made her feel good and important to the school district. Now that most of her friends didn't have children in the schools anymore they didn't call about how good or bad teachers were and what they were or weren't teaching. There weren't even calls about how they were carrying on anymore. But as each issue regarding changes in the schools (sex education or dealing with segregation or . . .) arose it was comforting (or was it just interesting) to know how highly people regarded the schools and assured her that the schools were just fine the way they were. She thought about her friends of many years and how long it takes to become lasting friends and where the cut-off point is. It isn't easy. It isn't easy.

The hardware store was a substantial operation. It belonged to Roy Neff. He had old friends in town just as Lois Woods did but they were.from a different branch. He was not uncouth except he was. He made Lois Woods nervous

except she was his friend and they usually voted together on issues . . . the ones that seemed to get the community most excited. He didn't have the education Lois did but he had a kind of pragmatic brightness she couldn't muster and a kind of gut response to people for which her courses or degree didn't prepare her. He operated on a prejudice wave length similar to that of Lois and Sam, but he accepted his own views and those of other people easier than they did. His feel for action on items he could essentially see, feel or touch was measurably greater than on the more esoteric and theoretical ones. Moreover, when the law and he disagreed (and in particular when the vocal community was on his side) the law suffered. He often sought and gained fidgety support for his position based on a kind of morality against the immorality of the law as it was stated. Law and order would take a dunking although the feeling that prevailed was that the flag flew better, good laws should be followed and due process was a good idea for those who had the patience for it.

On a five man board three is a majority. Change occurs . . . but usually very slowly and most often when it's less important. Resistance to change may rise very quickly and be very effective.

...Leadership.

...That's right.

...It's our job.

...Absolutely essential.

...If we don't who will?

...They count on us.

...The Mayor should stay out of this. Why do they go to him anyway?

. . . . . .

...O.K. Let's see.

...Is it Sam's turn? He's been vice president this year.

...That's right. Well, what about Lois? You know David didn't run for re-election and that just mixes everything up.

...No. That's it. Sam's president and Roy is vice . . .

...What?

...Oh, come on now. You know what I mean. Vice president.

...Is that it? Sam's president and Roy's vice president. We can go out and tell the audience now.

...Isn't it nice. We've never had any problems with one another. Well, you know what I mean. We can always get together on important things.

...Thanks. You know it doesn't matter who's president. (That's right. That's right. Besides . . . what would I tell Lillian. She'd say it's my turn. And it is. Anyway, if things get tough, Roy can take over. Laryngitis, you know.) We can all work together and it's always good for one of us who's up for election to be president. Besides, just holding the gavel doesn't make the difference. We can all say what we want to say. You know I'll never cut you off.

...It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. Write it a hundred times . . . perhaps it doesn't. But if the school board can't or doesn't identify its own leadership or both, what will the community do.

EPILOGUE (Addendum)

The Midcity School Board survived. Another did not as noted by the LAT - WP News Service.

"The _____School Board voted down three school integration measures that would have involved bussing, and directed the superintendent of schools to continue his integration plans, but on a voluntary basis. The measures were passed earlier this year, but that was before the election May 20th of two new board members who campaigned on a promise to rescind mandatory bussing."

"The leaders are dead. Long live the leaders." (Anon.)

THE ROLE

The charm dissolves apace,
And, as the morning steals upon the night,
Melting the darkness, so their rising senses
Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle
Their clearer reason.
Their understanding
Begins to swell: and the approaching tide
Will shortly fill the reasonable shores
That now lie foul and muddy.

From The Tempest by William Shakespeare

PRESENT

Many of the things school boards do are interesting but few are of consequence in the sense of being responsive to the most urgent needs of education.

An examination of the present role of the school board is an overwhelming and awesome task. The differences in the size, composition and wealth of the school population and the community result in significant differences in school board functions. They vary from the concept that the school board mans the teacher complaint desk to the actual position that the continued existence of the school district may depend on the action taken by the school board. The dissimilarities at the less complex end of the scale are highlighted by the responses to an accusation by a statewide teacher organization that a large number of school districts were not complying with a law requiring school boards to adopt a policy to provide for meeting with teachers about salaries and other items under certain circumstances. An inquiry about the stated lack of compliance brought these typical and illustrative responses:

1. "Ours is a small district. We do not have enough employees to form a committee. Our board is available to all employees at all times."

2. "Since I am the only teacher in this one room

school, and since I see one or more of the board members every day plus most of the parents, I didn't think a special policy was needed. Please correct me if I am wrong."

3. "There is only one teacher at this school. The teacher is also the principal and the secretary to the board of trustees. The relations between the trustees and teacher have been excellent."

If only the size of school districts is considered in connection with the role of school board members, contrasting student populations of 50, 500, 5,000, 50,000 and 500,000 emphasize the differences in possible and actual role. The relevancy between the school board role in the small district and the large district is clear. It is from nominal to non-existant.

The presently performed and generally successful segment of the school board role is largely ritualistic, functionary and involves the use of modest talents. In most critical issue areas the subject matter is very complex and most school board members (as well as people in general) do not have an adequate understanding to deal well with these issues. The area of school finance is a good example of this inadequacy. Many school board members illustrate their level of understanding of the subject by demanding that the budget be simplified so that they can deal with it more readily. By that they usually mean that it should be

reduced in detail and be more informative at the same time. Some barely approach the matter of finances. Few apply analysis. The inquiry that should be made is whether or not if one had $100,000, $500,000, $1,000,000, $5,000,000, $10,000,000, $50,000,000, $100,000,000 or $500,000,000 to spend annually he would assign the final responsibility for its expenditure to the persons who now have that role. The school board role breaks down (and this is not unusual) in such critical areas as providing disadvantaged children with an adequate educational opportunity. As with finance, existing structure and community attitudes provide severe limitations on what can be done. Generally, however, the school board reflects the attitude of the community. Financial resources are not mentioned as a limitation as a nation that can fly to the moon, build ICBMs and fight costly wars and whose people enjoy the standard of living they do cannot be considered to be limited in this way. Attitude and priority are the most severe limiting factors in this area.

ANALYSIS AND ANALOGY

There is no shortage of literature on the subject of the role of the school board. The fact is that there is a great disparity between description and performance of school board roles. Many school board members are of extreme consequence to the public schools. Most are not, and this is unfortunate. Dedication and good intentions are important qualities but they are not adequate in the absence of skill and talent. The most significant reservoirs of school board member talent exist in the larger urban areas where the problems of education are the least manageable.

The plethora of writings or the role of the school board is largely and usually correct but carries an aura of fantasy when application is considered. "You are hereby instructed to be talented, competent, thoughtful, senstive, responsive, skillful, . . ."

If creativity and innovation are important goals toward finding a way out of the relatively stagnant, and in many cases disintegrating, condition in which education finds itself and if words could accomplish the job, words such as those contained in Self-Renewal by John W. Gardner would almost surely be an appropriate vehicle. The book doesn't appear to change people as much as it lends support for their

feelings and objectives in many cases (If they like it.), reinforces what they are doing in other cases and must pass in and out of the minds of most. Dramatic change is simply not the result that occurs from people reading a book or listening to a lecture or having a discussion. Extensive challenges of major magnitude and complexity are handled by massive,expensive and intensive applications of money, commitment and talent. Papers such as this only bite away at the fringe of the problem and are largely duplicated in both effort and language by many other similar writings.

The system of boards which is and has been an extensive part of business and government is not likely to change dramatically in structure. The essence of the role has to be who will perform it. Boards of directors of business have a generally better understanding of this than school boards. The role of the former is largely functionary and assumes a critical observers role. It's most significant action is usually in the selection or replacement of the chief executive officer. Frequently a stockholder or group of stockholders exercise a continuing control over the board of directors. The return on investment is a relatively simply measured matter as are comparative performances between businesses. The impact of action or inaction on the part of the school board is not so easily measured. When the business entity is doing well by performance standards, the board of directors has a modest role and management presents the board

(or should) with the best available information on the future of the entity. This description of boards of directors of business is grossly oversimplified but substantially correct. It is relevant to the role of school board members although the return on invested capital in education is much more difficult to measure than in the case of a business, and the concept of major stockholders is not generally analogous to the community although it is sometimes similar in terms of exercise of influence.

Someone in the school district needs to have the talent for the use of foresight, be able to exercise it and have the ability to gain the approval of those on whom successful implementation depends. In this context there is a need for setting goals, establishing policies and evaluating results. Policy is not developed ordinarily by school boards but reacted to upon presentation by the superintendent and voted upon. And local control is to be sat upon.

FACTORS

Many complex factors must he considered, evaluated and their optimum position pursued in order to assess what the role of the school board should be in the future. Some of them are:

1. The availability and willingness of able, talented people to serve as school board members determines the ceiling that must be placed on the role or the dimensions that will be provided for it.

2. The importance of the need to forsee and pursue change must be recognized.

3. Available resources must be evaluated and priorities for use must be established.

4. Community attitudes must be developed so that the community will understand the need for adequate financing and encourage its allocation to the schools from available sources and in the most equitable manner. For example, the sensible and fair development of educational resources is not possible where richer districts are able to allocate more money per student than the poorer districts. In many ways this type of allocation works inversely to educational needs, priorities and objectives.

5. When educational needs and objectives are established serious and advance preparation of the

community for their advent must be made. In racial issues, for example, this factor has been poorly evaluated and community resistance has been glaringly underestimated. Great information collection and analysis in the identification of failure must take place.

6. Consideration must be given to optimum school district sizes. As frequently as possible school districts should come within these specifications.

7. Because community attitude plays such a significant role in the well-being of school districts and is frequently a strong impediment to educational development, a department of communications should be developed. This should be operated from within the district where suitable talent is available and on an outside contract basis where it is not available. Serious deficiencies exist in school districts in this area as well as in personnel which is a job assignment frequently given to persons without special skills.

8. The analytical aid possibilities inherent in computers must be developed and made available to school districts.

Many other major factors need to be considered but these are among the most important and are illustrative of

the critical areas that must be evaluated and pursued.

ASSUMPTIONS

In suggesting what the future role of the school board should be the following assumptions will be made and they constitute optimum circumstances:

1. Three member school board

Each member would be elected or appointed for a three year term and the re-election of one member would occur each year. If appointed, citizens committees would make the recommendation. If elected, citizens groups would urge candidates of their choice to run.

This would establish a better opportunity for quicker agreement and better understanding, reduce communication problems between board members themselves and the superintendent and insure that the maximum amount of time a school board majority unacceptable to the majority of voters could remain in office would be two years. Dialogue on educational issues would of necessity be before the community on an annual basis.

2. The superintendent

The superintendent would receive pay somewhat higher than comparable positions in industry to compensate him for the lack of incentive pay opportunities. He would assume the leadership role in the school district and the primary contact between the community and the

school district would be with the superintendent.

The employment agreement with the superintendent would be on no more than an annual basis. His salary should be significantly greater than the administrators on his staff. Horizontal entry into the job would be possible. Traditionally trained superintendents would compete with other applicants. Tougher, more conflict oriented applicants with significant administrative training and experience would surface. Resumes would take on a new look. Curriculum changes would occur at the graduate level to accommodate new job descriptions and opportunities. More talented people would enter the profession because of increased opportunities and more manageable challenges. This is possibly occurring at this moment because of increased interest in teaching and stronger social consciences on the part of young people.

This same concept could apply in other administrative areas such as personnel and communications.

3. Teachers

Tenure would be eliminated and teachers could be dismissed for failure to adequately perform the duties of the job as well as for cause. A state administrative hearing officer would hear the case if a hearing was requested by the teacher. Appeal from the decision would be available but could be reversed only for abuse

of discretion.

Teachers would not have to leave education or become administrators to achieve high incomes. Merit pay would provide for exceptional incomes for exceptional teachers.

4. Participation in educational program development

Teachers, students and members of the community would be encouraged to participate in all phases of education in the district. For example, policy suggestions would be sought from each, dialogue would occur and the superintendent would recommend whether or not the suggestions should be followed.

5. Finances

The nation will convert a consequential portion of its expenditures to the advancement of education and borrow where necessary as it would on any other investment where the promise of returns were great.

6. Research

Expenditures comparable to those made for space and war would be made to help establish need, possibility and methodology.

7. Size of district

An optimum size range for school districts would be established with appropriate variations for high and low density populations. Large metropolitan districts

would be broken up into smaller districts and the economic advantage of small enclaves would disappear and unification into larger more economically and administratively justifiable districts would occur.

As with the consideration of factors, there are other major assumptions, but these exemplify the condition that would exist for the exercise of the future role of the school board member.

FUTURE

Based on the previously stated assumptions, able and talented people in the community would be attracted to the position of school board member. It would offer the satisfaction of being involved in an important event, with people of talent where worthwhile and exciting things are taking place without working a material economic detriment upon school board members.

The future role of the school board member will be increased in significance and reduced in attention to less relevant matters. He will depend more on the superintendent and insist on more from him. The community will focus more on the superintendent and relieve the school board member from the less consequential tasks.

He will concentrate with the superintendent on advance planning and problem solving. Both he and the superintendent will be relieved from the consistent harassment of seeking funds with which to operate the school district.

The most important elements of this future role are people with talent who are able to exercise adequate judgment and successfully bring foresight into play.

"If I never had a goal,
I would not move forward.
If I never had a dream,
I would never know what might be."

(Anon.)

BACKGROUND SOURCES

Written observations on the school board role were received from:

Frederick T. Haley, President, Brown & Haley and former school board member, Tacoma, Washington

Dr. Richard M. Clowes, Superintendent of Schools, Los Angeles County, California

Dr. Jay D. Scribner, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Edward W. Clyde, Attorney at Law and Regent, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah

Dr. John I. Goodlad, Dean, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles

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